

UAlbany exhibit spotlights two artists interested in tension between individuals, groups

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By James H. Miller Updated 2:50 pm, Thursday, October 15, 2015



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Brian Tolle Cheaper by the Dozen, 2008

A man pushes a wheelchair through a remote landscape. In the chair sits an older man bundled in a yellow raincoat. His wheels, slathered up with mud, scarcely move. The chair falls over. The man pushes it up. Wordlessly, the two scale mountains, skirt a cliff and cross a meadow. When they reach the edge of a lake, others in raincoats emerge to hoist the chair up into a guard tower. Then the video fades out.

There is some of [Samuel Beckett's](#) desolate purposelessness in Israeli artist [Oded Hirsch's](#) videos, three of which are screening at the [University Art Museum](#) at the University at Albany, including this one, called "50 Blue" (2009). But there is also much that is observably warm and joyous in Hirsch's work. It happens that the young man straining through the film is the artist's brother, and the gentleman in the wheelchair their disabled father, who sustained a spinal injury when Hirsch was a boy. Collectively, with the help of the other players, they stage a childhood fantasy: to ennoble the father, to watch him rise.

Hirsch often concentrates on that intersection between collective and private, a tension that defines life in the kibbutzim, Israel's rural communes. Hirsch, who now lives in New York City, was raised at a kibbutz in the Jordan Valley. He recruits performers from his native community, and the kibbutz ideal, with its historic pursuit of a utopian vision and emphasis on physical labor, figures centrally into the videos.

Getting people to work together is, Hirsch has said, the principal subject of the art. His camera foregrounds the drama of human exertion, while the tasks themselves are basically Sisyphean.

In another video, "Nothing New" (2012), a parachutist is ensnared in electric power lines, and a cohort of kibbutzniks silently attempts a rescue. But even as they demonstrate the best of intentions and a selfless capacity for the work, there are profound limitations involved. The absurd and irrational are stubborn forces in much of Hirsch's work.

Addressing different utopian experiments, [Brian Tolle's](#) work couples well with Hirsch's. Tolle, who graduated from UAlbany with a political science degree in 1986, emerged as a sculptor in the 1990s, right when marginal groups were beginning to contest old, specious historical narratives built on exclusion. His plentiful research into America's past culminates in handcrafted Styrofoam sculptures that presume to be stable and well anchored: bogus objects that reference our national histories, fictions and dreams.

More Information

If you go:

"Oded Hirsch: Three Videos"

"Bordering Utopia: The Sculptures of Brian Tolle"

Where: University Art Museum,
University at Albany uptown campus

When: Through Dec. 12; open
Tuesday 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Wednesday-
Friday: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday noon-
4 p.m.; closed on Sunday and Monday.

Admission: Free

Info: 442-3300;
<http://www.albany.edu/museum>

"Tolle's world is a trompe l'oeil in three dimensions, where nothing is solid or secure," explains museum curator [Corinna Ripps Schaming](#) in an essay on the artist

The two faux-rock chimneys that center the galleries are cases in point. These ponderous objects reference the ruins of the Llano del Rio socialist colony, which was established in the Mojave Desert in 1914 and collapsed four years later. The chimneys, which once helped warm and nourish this well-intentioned, if flawed project (the colony rejected people of color, for example), are now all that remain at the abandoned site in California. Tolle's chimneys commemorate the founders' ambitions, but also have an undoubtedly silly, hollow look.

Levittown is another flawed utopian venture scrutinized here. Built on Long Island after World War II, the assembly line-style, one-size-fits-all housing project was aimed at veterans and erected on a foundation of racism and postwar conformism. A high point in the show, Tolle's "Levittown" (2009) soft-sculpture assemblages are witty and super weird. From platinum silicon rubber, Tolle creates deflated caricatures of the houses, flabby skins of suburbia, and fits them over a variety of found objects relevant to the culture of the 1950s, such as an old hair dryer, shopping cart, and a disabled vet's crutches.

The wild colors Tolle use reference how Levittowners painted their mass-produced homes to look more distinctive. That tension, between individual and group, cuts across both Tolle's and Hirsch's work, with illuminating results.

Miller is a frequent contributor to the [Times Union](#).